

Kindness, Goodness and Gentleness

Study Three

'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.'

(James 1:17-18)



Seeking human kindness, image © Nver Rahmanov

Kindness encouraged

(Read Ephesians 4:29-32, Colossians 3:9-12, 2 Timothy 2:24-25)

The act of showing kindness is not easily defined, other than by using synonyms such as courtesy, generosity, mercy, favour, warmth, compassion, goodwill, and charity as examples.

Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul has been contrasting the old life with the new, and for the new it is about 'doing good' and 'speaking well', avoiding unhelpful or unwholesome language which can be malicious, slanderous, or causes hurt and division. Christians should be building up and encouraging others when the need arises, not causing God who has given so much through his Spirit, to be saddened by words or actions, says Paul.

Giving the Colossians guidelines for daily life, Paul looks for a transformation from the old life to the new. He uses the metaphor of clothing, changing from a dirty and worn-out coat to a brand new one.

These are God's chosen and loved people, which should influence their behaviour toward kindness and gentleness always. It's a familiar theme with Paul, as we see in his letter to Timothy, where the instruction is to avoid confrontation with those who are argumentative, and instead, display a kindness and gentleness that might lead them to a knowledge of God.

Discussion

- 1: How does a genuine act of kindness make you feel?
- 2: How difficult is it within your own work, church, or social network to encourage an atmosphere that might embrace our understanding of kindness?

Sample

How easy do you find it in certain situations to reach for that old coat again, rather than keeping

Examples of kindness

(Read Acts 27:1-3, Acts 28:1-2, Genesis 50:15-21)

Sometimes it is not the larger expressions of kindness which impress, but smaller ones, perhaps spur of the moment decisions that remind us of our own responsibilities as individuals and a church.

This is seen in the story of Paul's disrupted sea journey to Rome in Acts 27-28. Paul and the other prisoners were handed over to a centurion called Julius. After a day at sea, they land at a port to bring on more cargo, and Julius allows Paul freedom to visit his friends until they are due to sail again. To allow such a high-profile prisoner out of his sight, even if accompanied, says something about the impression Paul had made on him, prompting this act of kindness and compassion.



fifty-fifty, image © US Library of Congress

Later, with the ship aground on a sandbar off Malta, the crew and its prisoners reach land safely (after Julius prevented the crew killing Paul and the other prisoners to stop them escaping!) Reaching the shore wet and cold, they find nothing but kindness. A fire is lit to warm them, and a local official offers hospitality to Paul and his companions. They are made to feel welcome.

Joseph's reunion in Egypt with the brothers who had treated him so badly, goes far better than they could ever have imagined. Joseph sees something of God's bigger plan where all that has happened to him was for the good of many, and offers his brothers nothing but kindness and generosity.

Sample

Discussion

- 3: Thinking of current local or national news, are there examples of kindness shown, whether small or large-scale, being highlighted by news presenters, or might these not be thought of as newsworthy?
- 4: The shipwrecked crew and prisoners found a welcome in Malta. Is there an acceptable Christian response to those coming ashore from small boats, or crossing borders as asylum seekers today?
- 5: Can Joseph's response to his brothers speak into the bigger political stories of today, where once friendly countries find themselves in conflict?

'I shall pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.' (Stephen Grellet)

'Together we can change the world, just one random act of kindness at a time.'
(Ron Hall)

'Wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for a kindness.'
(Lucius Annaeus Seneca)

'Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness. People are just people, and all people have faults and shortcomings, but all of us are born with a basic goodness.' (Anne Frank)

Remembering God's goodness

(Read Psalm 34:8, Romans 8:26-28, Philippians 1:3-6)

There is no doubt some overlap in comparing kindness and goodness, but opinion seems divided on their difference. The website Bible.com suggests that 'Goodness is a change in your spirit... the renewing of your mind by studying God's Word. Kindness is the action that comes from that place of goodness'.

The Psalmist is in no doubt about the goodness of God, and he encourages everyone to 'taste and see' that this is so, taking refuge in God and living the life that was expected of them. Lives are blessed in doing so.

Paul tells us that God's Spirit works in and through us, and 'we know that in all

things God works for the good of those who love him'. An alternative version says, 'in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good'.

Paul is lavish in his praise for the Philippian Christians, the way their faith bonded them together in the life of God, and their partnership with him in sharing the gospel through words and lives. The good work God began in their lives at their conversion will be continued until Christ returns for his church.

Sample

Discussion

- 6: What does the phrase 'The goodness of God' say to you?

- 7: We are encouraged by Scripture to do good works, whilst being reminded that we are not saved through such actions. What good works would you like to see the church getting involved in, either locally or even internationally?

Within our daily lives

(Read 1 Peter 3:15-16, 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8, Ephesians 4:1-3)

Peter spent the last few years of his ministry (and life) in Rome, and upon learning that Christians in other Roman provinces were being persecuted for their faith, urged them to remain faithful and treat others with respect and gentleness.

At that time Christians were falsely accused of being people haters for not going to pagan festivals, traitors for not calling Caesar 'Lord', and immoral for talking of their 'brotherly and sisterly' love. It was also suggested that they ate human flesh and blood at their meals. Perhaps not the easiest of situations in which to remain calm and show 'gentleness'!

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul was keen to distance his team's behaviour from that of the wandering philosophers, magicians, and false prophets of the day, emphasising the

exemplary behaviour of himself and his companions. They haven't said things to gain influence, or seek praise from anyone, even though as Christ's apostles they might have expected such a response. Surely his readers must remember how gentle they were previously, comparable even to 'a nursing mother'.

To the Ephesian Christians, Paul emphasises the importance of gentleness, humility, and patience in their dealings with others. This echoes Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', and Isaiah, who says of God, 'These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit...' (Isaiah 66:2)

Sample

Discussion

- 8: Misinformation, and slander, were regularly used against the Christians that Peter knew. How much is misinformation damaging the church today, do you think?
- 9: Many people today are searching for spirituality outside of the established church. Why do you think that might be, and what's the range of alternative 'spiritual' experiences on offer in your area?
- 10: Are gentleness and goodness seen enough today, inside or outside of the church, and ought we to be encouraging this, perhaps on our chosen social networks?

For thought and prayer

Give thanks for expressions of compassion and kindness within your local community - for giving and sharing.